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ABSTRACT

Beginning with three anecdotes that illustrate problems with current assessment practices in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL)/literacy programs, this paper reports a study that involved feedback from both programs and their funders. Literature is cited to show the opposing positions of proponents of standardized tests and those who search for objective mastery of discrete skills. Program representatives, funders, and students in Massachusetts and Rhode Island were surveyed about initial assessment procedures, placement, student involvement, and final assessment. State funders cited pressure from federal funding sources and state legislators in determining acceptable outcomes and the need for objectivity. Suggestions are offered for short- and long-term changes in the field of adult education, teacher education, building a knowledge base, initial and periodic assessments, use of models, oral assessment, and documenting progress. Contains 35 references. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

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Reassessing Assessment in Adult ESL/Literacy

Paper presented at TESOL, San Antonio, 1989

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Like many adult educators, over the years I've put energy into just about every area of the instructional process: methodology, curriculum design, materials development, program design --every area except assessment. I shied away from courses on tests and measurements because the underlying assumption -- that you could somehow "measure" learning gains in an objective, scientific way-- was inconsistent with what I thought about how people learn. I viewed the tests I was sometimes required to administer as somehow external to the teaching /learning process, something the students had to endure for the sake of funding purposes. However, like many adult educators, I've also been concerned about how my students are progressing. Are they learning language? Are they better able to read and write? Are they getting what they want out of the class? How could I answer these questions so I could, after all, improve my teaching?

In ESL composition courses it was a little easier. The goals of students were more directed. They were there to practice academic discourse to meet those goals. Students and I kept profiles of their work that documented progress; we held conferences and involved students in self-evaluations. But teaching in a Community Based Organization (CBO) was more difficult. Students came to class with different language abilities, different experiences with print, different conceptions of education, and many different reasons for being there. Yet, they were all grouped in the same class under the general classification of "level." However, their proficiency "levels" were never homogeneous anyway. To assess progress, I kept my eyes and ears open, listened to my students, kept folders, and so on. But that didn't satisfy me, and certainly was not adequate to satisfy external funding demands. So I administered the BEST (Basic English Skills Test) for pre-and post tests scores, telling the students not to worry as I saw their nervous reaction to the test.

Continued experience in the classroom, and continued reading on research in adult literacy assessment, has made me realize that assessment is not an afterthought to instruction. I saw instead that assessment often determines the content of instruction and is often contradictory to assumptions we have about literacy and language acquisition. I'd like to recount three of these incidents to illustrate my point.

One day I was walking down the hall in the CBO in which I was teaching. One of my colleague's door was open and I could hear the class being conducted. "Do you think an altercation will ensue?" he asked a beginning level class of Southeast Asian students. "I don't understand the question," came the choral reply. For those of you unfamiliar with that phrase, it's a question in one of the versions of the BEST test. The teacher, under pressure to show increased test scores because of the competetive nature of the funding process, was directly teaching the test to increase post-test scores.

In another position, I was working as a teaching assistant in the Education Department where I did my graduate work, preparing to teach a Reading and Study Skills class to Freshmen. In my internship with the director, we had been discussing the importance of psycholinguistic heuristics in teaching reading: skimming, scanning, reading the headers and conclusions first, activating prior knowledge, predicting content, as well as the importance of critical thinking : arguing with the writer, questioning assumptions and so on. Yet the tests we administered to see if students were proficient readers contained de-contextualized paragraphs with multiple choice answers that were to be read as quickly as possible. I was perplexed about the dichotomy between the assessment and the theoretical foundations for our practice. I asked if we were supposed to instruct the

students in the same reading strategies for reading the passages in the test, and if so, how could they complete it quickly enough.

I was informed that there wasn't really anything else available that could give us an indication of reading ability.
Two years ago, I was directing a workplace education project. We designed an initial assessment process for the immigrant workers in the program focusing on workplace "competencies" It including an oral interview and a literacy screening in English. As the test giver, I realized that the scoring system we had decided upon was not nearly as useful as the marginal comments I wrote all over the test. When students went beyond the testing questions and began to try and actually communicate with me, I was locked into the tester's mentality that this was a testing, not a teaching situation. So, when they tried to engage me in real conversation, like tell me in an excited fashion about their families (because, after all, I had asked about this as a test question) I had to cut them off to score their fluency. When they anxiously asked how they did on the literacy screening: (Teacher, is the spelling right on this? Can you correct it for me?) I had to tell them it was a test and their teacher would talk to them about it later. The constraints were real; I had twenty more students to test for that one class. From that experience, I recognized that the instrument itself was limiting, but the analysis of language interaction was valuable. But that analysis would only be valuable if it was connected to instructional purposes-- that is, if teachers could make use of the analysis to aid their instruction and to compare with ongoing assessment data. Though I scored the tests and summarized the results, the information was not as valuable in summary form, second hand, for the teachers. They basically got a monolithic numerical account of "level" along with comments I had written down students' goals and about general affect. If they had been involved in the initial interviews, they would have had a stronger sense of their students as they entered the class, and could plan for more

effective instruction.

These three anecdotes illustrate that there's a great deal to question in the field of adult ESL and literacy assessment. In my experiences, tests often do not seem congruent with instruction or with course goals. (Tirone 1988) recounts some similar experiences as an ESL practitioner.) There
seemed to be need for change, but the areas for change weren't fully delineated. I wanted to find out what other practitioners were doing by way of assessment, and if these concerns were wide -ranging.

In the section that follows, I will discuss the preliminary results of some investigation I've been doing on current assessment practices in ESL/literacy that involves feedback from both programs and their funders.

First, I'll discuss a larger context for the investigation, one that spirals out from my own preliminary anecdotes and examines some thinking in the field about assessment. Next, I'll summarize the feedback that I received from programs and funders about assessment. Finally, I will offer some implications about possibilities for change, framed within a practitioners point of view.

In recent years, increased concern has developed among educators, policymakers, funding sources, researchers, and others around issues of assessment in adult literacy. Evidence of this interest, and calls for reform, come from a variety of different sources and reveals different perspectives. Resent issues of the New York Literacy Assistance Center's Information Update (1988) and World Education's Focus on Basics (1988) were devoted entirely to the topic of assessment, including critiques of standardized testing and descriptions of innovations on the program level. A

commission on assessment practices was formed at a recent UK/US practitioners exchange at Lehman college during the summer of 1988 to research alternatives to current assessment approaches. An ad hoc seminar in NYC is meeting regularly to review research in the field and discuss issues in assessment, and a May, 1988 conference on Appropriate Evaluation convened by this group brought together voices of educators, policy makers, and funders around issues of assessment and evaluation.

Recent national level reports -- the National Assessment of Student Progress(1988)the Southport Institute study Jump Start (1989)-- have also argued for revision in assessment practice from the perspective of policy decisions. In Massachusetts, the state Department of Education (DOE) has established task forces on program effectiveness and staff development that have been addressing , in part, issues of assessment with program and funder input.

The interest in assessment is an extension of the interest in adult literacy in general. But there is no consensus about the best way to assess whether a person is literate because there is no consensus about the nature of literacy. Arguments about the best way to assess progress in literacy are often rooted in conflicting assumptions about models of literacy.
As Harvey Graff has noted in The Labyrinth of Literacy:

> Difficulties in definition and measurement of literacy severely restrict most attempts to discuss the subject. Even generally, discussions of literacy are fraught with confusion. Two reasons ....account for this: first is the vagueness which surrounds the conception of what it means to be literate." (58)

It's no wonder, then, that teachers question the best way to assess literacy. If we don't even agree on what literacy is, how do we assess it?

To begin to "unpack" these various conceptions of literacy, Brian Street's distinctions between autonomous and ideological models of literacy has often been evoked. (Lytle, Hill and Parry, and others) Briefly, Street defines the autonomous model as the dominant mode of Western literacy --school-based literacy. It has also been referred to as "essayist "literacy (Scollon and Scollon, Gee and others).The ideological model, according to Street, views literacy as a set of social practices embedded in particular social institutions. In fact, this model rejects the notion of a monolithic definition of literacy in favor of a multiplicitity of literacies, thus further complicating the area of assessment.

I've discussed briefly the two opposing paradigms because they inform two major opposing points of view about assessment. Proponents of standardized tests, and those who continue to search for the objective mastery of discrete skills, reflect an autonomous view of literacy. They cite the objective nature of normed or criterion referenced instruments that are both "valid and reliable" as superior to what they see as the subjective and relative nature of teacher interpretation. On the other hand, critics of this psychometric posture debunk the myth of objectivity that standardized tests seem to offer, suggesting that concepts like validity and reliability themselves are hypothetrical constructs that have achieved privilege over other forms of assessment(Johnston 1988). Some even suggest that testing is harmful because it reduces the liklihood of responsive, reflective action (Johnson 1988).

Taking an ethnographic perspective, Lytle (1986), Johnston (1988), and others argue against a a closed system with pre-designed quantifiable criteria. Instead, they suggest the need for a multi-layered profiling that treats literacy as a social activity rather than a set of discrete skills, and includes investigation of the learner's perceptions of, and uses of literacy.

The whole conversation of literacy assessment is further complicated within the field of ESL because of the added layers of complexity of second language acquisition. Oral proficiency and literacy proficiency are both concerns for programs who deliver ESL and literacy instruction. But just as there is no consensus on the nature of literacy, there is also no clear consensus on "proficiency" in second language acquisition.

In "Proficiency, Understanding the Construct," James Lantoff and William Frawley (1988) argue against the trend toward proficiency testing based on discrete measurement of levels. They specifically react to the revised ACTFL/ETS proficiency guidelines from much the same social constructivist perspective that Lytle, Johnston, and others argue against the autonomous models of literacy. They suggest that "A review of recent literature on proficency and communicative competence demonstrates quite clearly that there is nothing even approaching a reasonable and unified theory of proficiency."(186) The problem with guidelines, (such as the ACTFL/ETS, MELT SPL levels, FLS proficiency guidelines, and other linear measurements of steps and levels) they suggest, is that we examine proficiency in light of the guidelines themselves, so we have a classic case of the tail wagging the dog. We are no longer closer to understanding the concept (of proficiency) than we were 20 years ago, he notes, because the quest for proficiency has been dominated by psychometric principles." (185) These critics suggest that before we rush to designing more proficiency testing, we need to investigate further the notion of proficency, or rather,

proficiencies. That means looking more closely at socially defined, context embedded uses of language and literacy, and examining "proficiency" within that framework.

Recent research from a variety of sources (the anthropological work of Scriber and Cole, Scollon and Scollon, and Street, the ethnographic studies by Shirley Brice Heath, the classroom research work of Dixie Goswami, the historical work of Graff and the framework in cognitive psyschology offered by Lev Vygotsky) have lent considerable support to the ideological model. It also seems more appropriate for investigating the wide range of needs that adult learners bring with them to literacy and language classes--needs that are only rarely met, and only in part, by an emphasis on essay text approaches to literacy. Ethnographic perspectives have offered practitioners new and challenging ways to act as active researchers in the literacy acquisition process. Frank Smith (1988) has asserted that ethnographic research is the only kind that makes sense in probing literacy.

And there is an increasing awareness of the need to make assessment more congruent with practice. However, while many practitioners recognize the need for reform, they often cite the lack of resources (time, staff, money) to reflect on their current practice and to implement any changes.

Much of this is due to the fragmented nature of adult literacy delivery systems. Programs are often in a reactive, rather than proactive position, responding to RFP's (Requests for Proposals) and impending crises in budget cutbacks all the time. Further, they cite demands from funders for increased, objective accountability as stumbling blocks to innovation.

Ironically, while ethnography, qualitative research, and classroom research informs us and offers new possibilities for

teachers, there is an increased call for accountability and objective documentation from funders--often in the form of numbers of positive terminations (read: job placements or job training).

So all of the exciting directions are meaningless unless there's some way to examine them in light of what adult programs can do under present constraints and to examine where, if any, there are possibilities for implementating changes. The rest of this paper will focus, then, on the program perspective with these constraints in mind. In order to learn more about the program perspective, and to probe the accepted wisdom that funders are the main reason for preventing innovation or change in assessment practice, I attempted to do two things:

1. To find out what programs are presently doing by way of assessment, why, and where they would like to change;
2. To find out what funders are mandating, why, and where there is room for change.

The Process

First, I designed a questionnaire that was intended to be used as a heuristic for interviewing program representatives, funders, and students about assessment (See appendix). I conducted four face -to- face interviews with programs, and received 4 questionnaires from others. The programs represent the following: 6 community based programs, (5 in Massachusetts, 1 in R.I.)1 workplace education program, and 1 community college ESL program (both in Massachusetts). Programs served students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including Haitians, Chinese, Spanish speakers, Southeast Asian and Ethiopian refugees
I conducted the interviews with the following staff: two with

program coordinators (who had also been teachers in the program) one with two teachers together, and one with an entire staff of the ESL program.) The questionnaires I received in the mail included responded from three teachers and one teacher coordinator.

I conducted five interviews with funders: Massachusetts Department of Education, Massachusetts Office for Refugees and Immigrants, the Executive Office of Labor, and the Mayor's Office for Jobs and Community Services. I also interviewed a representative from the R.I. Department of Education, who funded one CBO I interviewed.

Reflection on the Process

I found that, like my initial ESL workplace assessment experience, the marginal comments, the tangents and the anecdotes, the explanations that backtracked and moved ahead were often more revealing and valuable than the straightforward answers to the questions. No interview was shorter than 1 1/2 hours, and most lasted two hours. Much of this was due to the need to unravel the bureaucratic funding and administrative structure and demands placed on programs. Then, there was the inevitable slide from talking about assessment to talking about every other aspect of language and literacy instruction. Graff's comment about "discussions of literacy as fraught with confusion" certainly rang true in these interviews.(In fact, it almost seemed that a different kind of interview--one that probed teachers perceptions of literacy--should have preceded dialogue about assessment.)

An interesting aspect of the interview process was that it acted as time set aside for reflecting on current practice--something programs don't often seem to have the luxury of doing. One teacher noted that while we were engaged in the interview, the questions

and the process were making her think critically on what she was doing with assessment and her teaching. Further, in talking to program representatives and funders both, the "affective barrier" (Krashen,) was very high: no one was neutral on the subject, and most ended up venting about the problems and constraints each of them saw in the area.

The following section is a summary of the main issues that surfaced from the interviews and questionnaires.

What we talk about when we talk about assessment

During the interviews, we were constantly negotiating meaning about how the term assessment was used. Questions kept arising: Do you mean assessment or evaluation? Do you mean progress or outcomes? I was struck, more than ever, by the resurfacing of certain vocabulary when discussing assessment. Words like "measure" "instrument" "Battery of tests""diagnosis" reflected clinical and even military metaphors. Other terminology like "skills," and "levels" kept surfacing. Some teachers were obviously uncomfortable with the use of such terms while others seemed to accept them uncritically. The use of assessment terms like "grade levels" have often been described as an expedient shorthand due to the lack of other agreed upon standards. However, such language, it seems to me, is more than innocuous shorthand; it continues to shape the way we think about assessment, much the same way sexist language affects the way we think about men and women. The way we talk about assessment is in itself worthy of re-examination of the assumptions that lead us to talk that way.

Defining Progress

It is axiomatic to report that "progress" is often defined differently by funders and programs. Further, it is sometimes

defined differently by teachers and the programs they teach in. These various conceptions of "progress" have direct implications on assessment and in turn, instruction.(I'm also aware that students' conception of progress, not yet examined in this paper, is a critical piece to looking at the various definition of what counts as progress.)

In order to discuss what counts as progress, it was necessary to discuss goals. There was often a schizophrenia in describing goals. Programs would sometimes describe the "official" goals immediately and move, with probing, to discuss the sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit set of goals programs develop in response to student needs. While the official goal (say, as reflected in an RFP) might be stated as "To serve a certain number of people and place them in jobs or higher education,"unofficial goals might be defined as: "create a safe environment where students can bring their own issues to discuss freely...to provide support services... to provide access to literacies ...to guide people toward opportunities as they define them.... "There are not only differences between funders and programs. As one teacher noted, "The only program goal is to teach English.

Individual teachers bring their own goals to help students become more self-sufficient, self-advocating, create a community where larger issues can be explored."

Confusion among agendas within the programs seemed to muddy the question of assessment. Issues needed to be unraveled: assessment for whom? By whom? For what reasons? Through my interviews, I realized that the question of mandated outcomes from funders was far more complex than I thought. First, many adult education programs have a multiple of funding sources, all of whom require different kinds of reporting and different acceptable outcomes. The two main sources appear to be employment-related (Division of

Employment and Training) and the Department of Education. Employment related sources often require performance -based contracts; programs get a certain amount of money for each person they place in a job or "successfully terminate." The Department of Education has more flexible outcomes, but still asks for "levels" as a way of determining and documenting progress. In fact, one of the major political battles around literacy issues in the state of Massachusetts in FY '88 was the attempt to consolidate all of adult education --not under the Department of Education, but under the Division of Employment and Training--a movement that many refugee programs have already had to face as refugee resettlement/education policies moved toward stricter job-related/performance-based restrictions. In the middle of this crisis, many program representatives expressed a fear of the consequences of being administered by the Division of Employment and Training (DET).

The conflict in goals has very real consequences for programs. For example, one refugee program coordinator said: "Strict regulations (about what counts as outcomes) limits what you can do. We offer a range of services: case work, assistance with handicapped, support services. But if someone doesn't get placed, we don't get money. We try to get less restricted money (from other sources) so we can take in the 'hard cases' that are hardest to place. We don't want to 'cream.'" She also noted that a lot of new arrivals who come to the institution for ESL aren't ready to be placed in jobs as soon as possible. However, because placement outcomes are demanded, the assessment process has a heavy emphasis on employability plans for that student. Therefore, other student goals are often overlooked in the whole process. "There's pressure to push for quality inside (the agency) she noted,"but it's defined differently from the outside." Another agency serving Haitians gave a similar response. "Part of the intake relates to funders mandates--so an employability plan is the focus of students goals.. This does effect the educational

services. You can't do everything you want because the education you provide is scewed toward placement."

The use of initial assessment procedures

Most programs reported that they are not required to use a standardized test, a freedom that many other states do not have. However programs were required to have some form of initial intake/assessment procedure approved by the funding source so they could indicate progress through levels. Levels had to be correlated to those defined externally--say, Student Performance Levels of the MELT (Mainstrean English Language Training)curriculum or federally defined DOE levels. All but one of the programs reported the use of a test. Three used standardized tests: Basic English Skills Test (BEST), Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS), and a standardized reading test for advanced ESL literacy. Others used "home grown" varieties that included oral interviews, grammar exercises, and reading/writing samples. These tests were scored in a variety of ways, usually reflecting a discrete point scoring system rather than a holistic analysis. The unanimous use for the initial tests was for placement of students into appropriate level of instruction. Even the home-grown tests, were scewed toward placement or levelling purposes due, in part, but not entirely, to the external demands for standardized accountability of progress. In most cases (five out of eight) someone other than the teacher conducted the initial assessment: an " intake person", counselor, or job counselor often conducted the tests and initial intake. In most cases, the information collected from the initial assessment was not related to the instruction that followed: "There's no relationship between what's tested initially and what's taught in class" one participant noted. That's only for placement purposes." When asked about what happened to that information from the initial assessment, one teacher looked at me and said: We put it

in student files! The information did not seem to be actively used by teachers because they didn't seem to value it.

Another problem relating to initial assessment was the problem of long waiting lists so that the initial information is outdated before the student comes in. Then it's up to the teachers to assess students when they get into the classroom. (One program reported a list of 700-3,000 students; people write from China to be put on the list.) Though intial, program designed or standardized placement tests didn't seem connected to instruction, it was clear that once students were in the classroom, some kind of informal assessment related to instruction took place.
Only one agency (with unrestricted assessment processes) reported some different approaches. A representative from this agency said that they "deliberately chose not to subject people to tests." One of the teachers said she realized the futility of giving her pre-literate students the BEST test, because "they couldn't even hold it right." Most students couldn't identify the tests as a test. We decided we had to start somewhere else." Another teacher in the same program noted "We didn't want a competency checklist, either, because it pre-determines what is taught. In lieu of testing, they are taking a case study approach, and have designed a heuristic for describing kinds of literacy behaviors they valued as part of the literacy acquisition process. These behaviors are described on a matrix and updated at regular intervals, so that other kinds of progress than tests scores and competencies could be examined. Within this program, the teacher indicated she likes to conduct the initial interview with her own students because "If it's my own student, I'm more aware of the student when he or she comes to class.

This program was unique because they questioned the value of moving students from grade level to grade level. One teacher was indicating some progress she had seen with some students who were in the "perpetual student "category --the category of student who

seemed not to make progress at all. (Though she didn't believe that the students couldn't make progress.) She tentatively ascribed the progress in part to the group interaction in the class, and in part to investigating the home uses of literacy outside of the classroom, and in using that information to help her instruction. As a result, rather than moving students ahead when they were obviously progressing within the social framework of the class, it was decided that they would keep the students in the same class --perhaps over the course of two years if the students wished to stay.

Absence of student involvement

Even though many of the programs defined their approach as learner-centered, responding to student needs or interests, in many cases assessing needs or goals was not seen as an integral part of the initial assessment process. Some intake procedures did ask for employment related goals, due to the nature of the funding mandates. Others did ask questions about goals on the intake form. However, one teacher reflected a common response among ESL teachers: it doesn't make sense to ask that question in levels 1-5 because everyone is there "to learn English." She added that maybe in the higher levels of the curriculum it might make sense to ask what students' goals are, reflecting that, in fact, there was the highest rate of attrition between levels 5-6, so it might be good to see what their goals are at that level. Many ESL teachers reflected the difficulty in probing for student goals and reasons for coming to class, though they acknowledged that students do come for a multiplicity of purposes and this in fact complicates instruction. This is certainly an area that deserves exploration. As Lytle has noted, part of instruction in adult education is to help students articulate and clarify their goals as more opportunities are presented to them in the learning process. Further, though programs indicated that tests are made

available for teachers to look at, no one reported sharing their information from the tests with students, though one teacher responded that she shared it "if they asked." Two programs gave interesting reasons for this decision. One participant noted: We tell them what level the tests indicate, but we don't go over the content...if we went over the test scores they'd go out and tell their friends what the answers are--so we have to protect the content of the tests. In excluding students from participation in the results of the tests, it seems that the social relations in the classroom are being established from the first day on. An apparent contradiction arises : if students are not allowed "in" on the initial assessment process, how does a learner-centered curriculum follow? Periodic or on-going assessment in the classroom is most directly related to instruction, but is often impressionistic, anecdotal, and not documented.

All program representatives concurred that some kind of teacher based assessment goes on periodically throughout the course of instruction and that this kind of assessment is most directly related to instruction. It was often described in an impressionistic manner: For example, one teacher noted: "We know if students are progressing--it's (assessment) is not done formally. We know it inside--we sense it--we observe them in class. We get a feeling if they follow in class or don't follow. I use observation and common sense; I talk to my students. I ask them if they're getting their needs met and they tell me. Is the documentation really important?" Teachers also noted that they do have various kinds of "proof" in students' papers and other artifacts that they collect.
Similarly: "Assessment is used to evaluate instruction by the teachers who do it. We assess the class and the group's sense of it's own progress and this very much affects how I will proceed with my own teaching....I find out what students like and don't like, how they believe they learn best, and what activities seem

to work." Other teachers reported that they used the results of the weekly evaluations in class, done as a group, to gather information and use it to change or modify what they do in the class. One teacher noted: "Student progress is generally monitored during the course through teacher observation .....sometimes the information is used to further define the curriculum and course content..." Though teachers may not have an explicit set of guidelines for what they consider assessing progress, the language in certain progress reports reveals a set of assumptions that often define progress in part by things like rise in self esteem and collaborative learning. One teacher kept notes on her students' progress and noted: (Juan) was an inspiration to the others in the class. He started out without participating in class, then ended up by helping other students and becoming more active ..." In some cases, results of periodic assessment were shared with students, as in the case of weekly group evaluations in the classes. In many cases, they were not. For example, the social service model in one refugee program brought together teacher, case manager, and job developer to discuss students progress toward resettlement and employment goals. But the case manager acted as a broker for the student, taking back information from the sessions, and bringing information from the student. This model may be one that sensitively reflects an understanding of Southeast Asian culture; nevertheless the student continues to be excluded from the process of periodic assessment and goal setting in a direct way.

Final Assessment

Though none of the programs were required to administer final testing, half of them did, and these were teacher-designed tests. Reasons for the final were to place students in the next level of instruction; to provide information for the next teacher; to recommend action for the student for placement or other purposes; or to determine a grade. Final test results were only shared with

students in one instance--to give them their grade. Teachers were not always satisfied with their assessment approaches, but for different reasons.†These reasons often reflected different orientations to models of literacy. One teacher noted: "I try to find out what students like and don't like and what seems to work... and the group assessment affects how I will proceed. But, "I'm not satisfied because I'm always winging it. I never assess the same way twice. Sometimes we don't assess at all, and I think students like some form of assessment. One teacher said: "I never seem satisfied with finding out what students have mastered during the course. At the end of the term I find myself asking 'Did they use English at home? How well did they learn what I taught?'" Others noted dissatisfaction for other reasons: "We're still working on placement test revisions" and "I am not completely satisfied with the assessment procedures because I feel that they could have the potential to be more directive in assigning language levels....Others noted that they realize they could get students more involved in the process, but it's hard...demands on funders make it hard...." When asked what they would like to change and what they would need to change it, responses varied. One teacher noted that she'd like better literacy assessment, and admitted that this would require training of those administering it. Another indicated that "we need to find ways to use information from initial and on-going assessment, and added "I'd like to get students more actively involved in the process."

Another teacher wanted to know more about ideas for evaluating individual students (as opposed to group class evaluations) and ideas for standard "process-type" assessments. Too, she wanted creative ways to share feedback from the individual to the group. As noted, not all teachers spoke in a unified voice. One teacher, who was in the process of revising an ESL placement test, indicated: "I'd like to get a fast, reliable set of placement tests that can be scored immediately and accurately by non-ESL

faculty and limited English speaking assistants."

Funders

As mentioned earlier, information from funders was collected in order to probe the accepted wisdom that there is no room to move beyond funders mandates. I wanted to find out if perspectives were as polarized as we assume them to be, if there is any possibility of reconciling perspectives between funders and programs, and if there seemed to be areas where alternative forms of assessment were possible.

External Demands:

Just as teachers cite demands from funders as a major constraint for limiting assessment possibilities, state funders cite pressure from federal funding sources and from state legislators in determining acceptable outcomes from adult education programs. Too, funders often spoke from the same dichotomy programs did, at times they reflected the "official" and "unofficial versions" One funder noted: "The movement (in general) is toward hard data...programs will be asked to provide hard data with a starting point and an ending point--either standardized tests or competency checklists. There's an express train coming over the hill at us...." Another funder corroborated: "The direction in social services (where refugee money comes from in Mass.) is toward more performance based standards. There's a drive toward stricter accountability. We need to spend money wisely, human services will be tightened up." The major state funder of adult education programs (in Massachusetts) indicated that his department is not prescriptive about using certain tests, but however programs choose to do assessment, they are required to present the information in terms of levels mandated by the federal government. Therefore, some creative interpretation has to take place in order to translate the different conceptions of progress

into federally mandated guidelines. Of the 5 funders, only one required a standardized test, but all were concerned about objectivity.

The need for objectivity, or "You can't send that to Springfield."

In direct contrast to the ESL teacher who could feel when her students were progressing, one funder noted:"As a funder, I'm becoming less and less excited about 'touchy -feely' approaches to answer whether anyone learned anything. Programs need to systematically measure students gains. Every teacher has his own feelings and gut reactions about what constitutes progress. Without standardized tests, programs slip into subjectivism. We need clear statements about what constitutes progress." Another funder noted: "When I hear 'I don't do tests, I know, I can't tell you why, I know' It's not acceptable, it's inherently judgmental. You can't just say 'well, I talked to them for a little while and I get a good sense' because you can't send that to Springfield... The concern for uniform language that could be translated from one program and location (e.g. Boston) to another program and location (e.g. Springfield) was this funder's compelling reason for "objective" outcomes.

This sentiment was echoed by another funder who asserted that "the judgment of the teacher isn't enough. We need a combination of clear, objective standards (of measurement) plus the judgment of the teacher. He added that he didn't feel that there should be a single measure of anything. He admitted that grade levels for adults (mandated by federal guidelines and thus translated to the program level) are indeed meaningless. But they are expedient, he noted, and easier than complex profile analysis of progress. Yet another funder cited the need for a common language across program lines. A year long study among Adult Literacy Initiative literacy programs in Boston resulted in the establishment , with

input from programs, of "benchmarks"--descriptive clusters of various "levels" of speaking,listening, reading, writing, that could be used to illustrate students' progress in these areas.(These benchmarks reflect a similar proficiency rating scale approach to the FSI, ACTFL, or other rating scales, though they reflect more subtle progressions in language and literacy acquistion for immigrant adults, as opposed to more highly educated foreign language learners.)Though these benchmarks have the potential to be used as a holistic scoring device in ESL programs, there has been no training with teachers on how to implement them. Many programs are simply correlating the benchmarks with the results of discrete point tests. Only one funder stood alone in privileging the individual program, noting that "we don't require a standardized test and I hope we never do." He noted that the state initiative for the workplace education project has over the past two years developed guidelines for the goals of the program, with input from various state partners and from programs. Within those guidelines, programs should be allowed to determine their own goals and design a program that accomplishes those goals." In this case, the agency hired a coordinator , a former practitioner with years of adult education experience, to monitor programs and to help with a formative evaluation of what's taking place.In working from program's strengths, the coordinator's role included capacity building, trouble shooting, and offering various kinds of support do the programs can deliniate goals and attempt to work toward them.

Contradictions and differences arose when we went beyond the issue of external funding demands and the need for objectivity and began discussing possibilities for moving beyond these constraints. For example, assumptions about teachers' abilities to successfully gauge students progress was questioned: One funder noted that while he didn't mandate tests, he was leaning toward them for several reasons. One of the main reasons, he said, is

because "Teacher training is taken care of" with standardized tests. In other words, someone has already prepared and defined the test, and there are clear, objective outcomes and methods for administering the tests. "Part of the problem, he said, is the half-assed way of doing assessment. Teachers just want to get done with it-- the longer you do it the less accurate you become. Teacher training is taken care of when you use a test. This same funder, however, had started his interview by stressing that all adult ed should begin by getting students to articulate their goals, and that an important measure (in addition to "indicators that document progress") was asking the student if they achieved those goals. Further, he supported an experimental, ethnographic approach to assessment in a pilot literacy project for non-native speakers because he recognized that it would yield useful information for the field.When probed about the contradictions in his point of view, he admitted: "I flip-flop about these issues." A combination of external demands and lack of acceptable alternatives seemed to inform his opinion about assessment; tests were an expedient, but what else can you do?

It was clear that he saw the pilot program as being somehow separate from other adult ed programs. On the one hand,there was a teaching/research project with a clear mission to include innovation and experimentation --and a movement away from standardized tests. On the other hand, then there were other programs where the same inquiry, experimentation, and innovation was were not encouraged or even permitted.

Cooking the stats

Though most of the funders were firm in their demands for objectivity, they were aware that a lot of "creative statistical modification"goes on, both on the program level and the state level. Therefore, a whole cycle of questionable objective data seems to be collected and transferred:

attendance figures, levels of literacy attained, # of students, # of hours, etc. --information that's translated into acceptable outcomes and levels from a source removed from teaching and learning. Thus, the paths toward achieving objectivity are illusory at best. This polarization of objective/subjective is a key area in the debate. Johnson (198) and Patto (1975) have provided excellent arguments against the spurious claim that standardized tests are more "objective" than teacher observation. Johnston, for example, argues that all forms of educational evaluation, including standardized tests, involve interpretation; further, he argues that concepts like reliability and validity are not universal, but hypothetical constructs that have achieved privilege over other kinds of assessment.

Alternatives -Where can we go?

One funder was quite straightforward in his interest to find out more from programs about what else they were doing to meet the needs of students. "Nothing else counts right now except job placement" he noted,"but I'm very interested in finding out how to document what counts as success in resettlement, including self -esteem and other 'unallowable activities'--things programs provide beyond job placement." He added: "The more we can find and package about what's effective in programs, the more tools we have to validate what's going on. The more we can get the message (to Washington) that we value the intangibles, that we're interested in other things than job placement, ...the better". He expressed interest in, not just a judgement of, why students drop out, why they don't get jobs; if people aren't moving through the SPL levels, he asked, does that necessarily mean it's a sub -standard program? The message was clear: "we need more data from programs, as ammunition for moving in other directions." Though he was asking for additional information, however, he was also sensitive to asking programs to do more than they are doing."Teachers already have so much to do, I don't want to

burden them--I don't want them to have to take on more work." The issue also arose around how best to report other kinds of progress to funders who invariably do not want to wade through all the stuff teachers collect in class. Packaging is very important, one funder noted."If you present information in an authoritative, socially scientific way, it is more likely to be looked at than if you try to present all the rich source of data that teachers themselves collect to document student progress. He described a final report of the statewide workplace program that included some quantifiable data, but relied on the most part on interviews with learners. The report, he said, received favorable responses form legislators. Another funder noted, when discussing ways in which programs might validate and report other kinds of outcomes,"Keep it simple."

In talking to funders about student progress, discussions led to other aspects of program effectiveness. One funder noted that while student progress is one indicator of a successful program, this area was looked at in terms of a more holistic evaluation of the program. In a workplace education program, for example, other questions are equally important, questions like: How well are all the partners satisfied? What other things are the programs doing? What kind of staff development is going on?
While funders seem to search for objectivity by standards defined outside the classroom,teachers value assessment based inside the classroom--through observations, interactions with students, teacher made tests that directly relate to what's covered in class. However, teachers were also not satisfied with their current impressionistic ways of doing assessment, because they felt they were "winging it." While they valued their own interpretations of students progress, they also wanted to learn better ways to do it, more systematically, and to have more time and resources in order to better assess.

Implications

Before working toward change, it seems that teachers and programs need first to determine the different audiences and reasons they have for assessment . By separating out the various purposes of assessment, and by answering questions of who, what, why, how, and what's needed in the assessment process, programs or individual teachers can make better choices about where they can make short and long term changes. Rather than starting with funders' agendas for assessments, perhaps teachers can start with exploring ways in which they can act as change agents in their own classes, so that assessment is better connected to practice.This would mean looking at changes in assessment with a different set of questions. Rather than starting from "What do the funders want," the starting point becomes "How can I improve my teaching?" or "How can we improve services?" By putting efforts into alternatives that better serve the needs of learners and better documents the multi-dimensional nature of progress, teachers might then explore ways to translate useful in formation into required policy language. In cases where programs are not mandated to use standardized tests (like those described above) they might become more proactive in making changes by stating up front in the proposal for refunding that they will be using experimental approaches to assessment that they will document at the program's end. Often, funders require certain kinds of assessment and outcomes because that is what programs state in their proposals, which then become their contracts.

If a well-conceived proposal with alternative "outcomes" is accepted by funders, and programs make good on their efforts to carry out a new system, the vicious cycle perpetuated by the RFP process might be broken. Then we can begin to show examples of "what else is there."

Short/Long Term Changes

I'd like to share some directions for revisions in adult ESL/literacy assessment. They involve both short term/long term, small scale/large scale changes.

LARGE SCALE

The Field/Advocacy

The field of adult education itself needs to be legitimized, stabilized, and professionalized. Teachers need support, time, money, and resources to provide quality instruction, and to advance the field through contributions from classroom-based research. Community based organizations are the most fragmented of adult ESL literacy delivery systems. Changing the field involves political action--lobbying for legislation, forming coalitions, and other efforts. Some of this work is being done in Massachusetts. For example, the Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Literacy has been a major force in lobbying efforts for adult literacy ; the Boston Adult Literacy Fund was established to do private sector fundraising for adult literacy programs. On the program level, teachers may want to seek out staff development/research money to fund work on assessment revision. Without necessary resources, we can't expect major changes.

Teacher Education

Much of the reason teacher observations and interpretations were not valued by funders, we recall, is because teacher expertise was questioned. Indeed, that's one reason that was given for relying on standardized tests rather than teachers--in a standardized test, your teacher training is taken care of. Yet there's an obvious lack of logic here. Funders have admitted that standardized tests are in fact limited and inadequate. The

solution hardly seems to continue to use such inadequate means. Instead, we need to look toward better ways to improve teacher education . In short, before we can make significant changes in assessment, we need to become better educated about language and literacy instruction. It's true that many ESL teachers, at least in the state of Massachusetts, are not adequately prepared to deal with the complexities of language and literacy needs adult ESL students bring with them to the classroom. Certification requirements are often not congruent with the kind of preparation that's needed in adult education, and training opportunities are limited.

One thing funders could do is to build in staff development as a priority for the RFP process and provide necessary financial support for staff development. In fact, the state Department of Education in Massachusetts is doing just that for FY '90, by using all of its "Special Projects" funds from federal sources for staff development.)If more of a value were placed on teachers' professional development, and more resources were available in this area, the expertise of teachers in adult education might increase. Thus, there would be less of a need to go outside the classroom to find experts who "make better tests" or design criteria for assessing progress. Further, in addition to the other kinds of staff development teachers ask for (methods workshops,for example) assessment needs to be foregrounded as a key area. If teachers had time and money, they could begin to talk together about their practice and about how to better assess students' progress. They could collectively, with student input, develop criteria for defining progress, and design heuristics for better classroom observation. With increased staff development, teachers could become more active members of the interpretive community that explores, defines, and criticizes issues in the field of language acquisition and literacy. If teachers wanted to work toward alternative approaches to assessment, a staff development project might allow teachers to frame their own research questions based on their lived experiences in the classroom.

Building a Knowledge Base

The assertion that teachers' interpretations and observations are idiosyncratic and subjective deserves to be questioned. A body of knowledge that is constructed by a group of knowledgeable peers who are part of an interpretive community carries with it the social justification of belief (Rorty 1979, Fish 1980). This is no more, or no less objective than the group of testers who concurred that one type of literacy should be measured in one type of way. Beliefs about what counts as progress, and how that progress can be assessed, are socially justified within the community of adult educators themselves.I think this group constitutes "knowledgable peers" status. In the process of educating themselves, teachers can become more powerful agents in efforts toward change. They can explore the area of proficiency and literacy just as experts outside the classroom do. Reassessing assessment DOES mean reassessing what it means to be a proficient speaker or a literate person. With greater staff development possibilities, teachers can become more active members of the larger interpretive community that contributes to the field of adult literacy and ESL. Theory and research in ethnography, applied linguistics, cognitive psychology, education, literary criticism, philosophy of language, can inform us in our practice. And teachers often talk about similar things when they do their own informal assessment. What's needed are more opportunities for teachers to make explicit their critieria for progress and their strategies for observing progress. In working collectively with other members of the interpretive community, teachers can work toward legitimizing their own observations and framing them so they do not appear ideocyncratic and subjective. Such work could also improve the quality of instruction. For example, if teachers explicitly state that they value students "taking a risk with the language," they not only have to figure out ways to assess if a student is making progress with that area; they also have to figure out ways to build that into the curriculum as a teaching

objective. Since the interpretive community of language acquistion and literacy extends to the "big R" Researchers of the Academy, practitioners might better work collaboratively with members of colleges and universities in the various disciplines that inform our practice. Rather than relying on these representatives (or, on the other extreme, ignoring their value), teachers could work in a dynamic fashion with them --linguists, anthropologists, teacher educators, literary critics, language philosophers, and others --in linking theory and practice, in validating classroom work. In Dixie Goswami's words (1987) teachers need to "reclaim the classroom." Rather than remaining silent receptacles of experts' knowledge, teachers need to test out what they do in light of new information or perspectives that might come from outside of classroom experience. Only after we validate our own knowledge, and expand areas where we need to become more educated, can we begin to collectively make decisions about how to deal with funding constraints.

Smaller Scale

In the area of literacy assessment, there are valuable models for programs to examine as points of departure, models that involve teachers and learners working together. Though many of them focus on literacy for native speakers of English, they nonetheless provide innovative conceptual frameworks and specific suggestions for implementaiton. ESL teachers might explore adapting these models with non-native speakers of English. The following are some valuable concrete points of departure:

Initial and Periodic Assessments

Even though initial assessment is reported by teachers as not very useful to instruction, it could be. Student involvement is a critical factor. Even if programs do little else than involve

teachers and students more directly in the assessment process they now use, current tools might yield more useful information. For example, Meier (1981) has noted that in discussing test results with the testee (even in the case of standardized tests) a great deal is learned about the way a student thinks about the reading process. Sitting down with students to discuss reasons for various test choices could become the beginning of a co-investigative process of assessment. One adult basic education ABE practitioner noted that by questionning students about choices made in the TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education), the teacher can learn a great deal about the student's conception of the reading process (personal correspondence).

Classroom observations and periodic conferences with students could follow the initial interview as a way to systematically check in with students about their progress, needs, goals. These interviews could take the form of writing conferences used by many composition teachers. Rather than viewing such conferences as added additions to class time, they could be seen as a part of class time. Students could sign up to meet with teachers at specified hours. Conferences could either replace classroom time or occur concurrently with class time that's designed for independent work without the teacher. Conferences might take the form of one-on-one meetings between teacher and student or meetings with small groups of students, where learners share their conceptions of progress and identify group interests. An emphasis away from "levels" and toward real life uses of literacy encourages a different perception of literacy as well.
There are other possibilities for assessing progress. Outside participants might come in to act as conversation partners with students while the teacher observes. Teachers could observe each others classes and give feedback about the strategies a learner is using to communicate in English. Students could assess each other, as well as engage in self evaluation. The following describe some current alternatives that provide concrete models.

Models

Susan Lytle (1986) describes her work with low-literate adults as part of the Adult Literacy Evaluation Project through the University of Pennsylvania. Lytle's model involves a series of conferences with the adult learner: an initial planning conference and periodic conferences to discuss changes -- not only in how a learner is progressing in reading per se, but in the learner's perception of and uses of literacy. All of this contributes to a more holistic examination of what it means to become "literate." Teachers might consider some variations of Lytle's model for assessing ESL literacy, perhaps by integrating the conference approach with regular group instruction. Good and Holmes (1982) in their seminal work How's It Going: An Alternative to Testing Students in Adult Literacy provide specific models for doing learner-centered assessment and for translating the information on a grid for record keeping purposes. The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU) in London also has published a monograph entitled Initial Assessment of Reading Skills as an insert to an edition of their ALBSU Newsletter (1988). In the approach described, learners are asked to select from whole texts, for example, a post card, a recipe, a newspaper article. They are then asked questions about the piece of reading. What's different from most initial assessments is that the learner is encouraged to discuss content with the assessor, to explain why a particular piece was chosen, to discuss interests, and to make connections with the piece of reading and the connection to the learner's life, experiences, and reading practices. While this approach seems most suitable to more experienced speakers of English, it certainly has merit and possibilities for adapting to less fluent speakers. A bilingual compenent could be added for beginning speakers to facilitate discussion; a screening of native language literacy could be added.

Marcie Wolff and others at the Institute for Literacy Studies at Lehman College has piloted a student-to-student assessment project. Students are placed in classes through an assessment procedure conducted by peers, the teachers, and themselves. In all of these cases, students are directly involved in, not removed from, the process of assessment. East End Literacy in Toronto has developed an assessment "kit" (1989) for a one-to-one instructional model. The kit provides guidance to teachers for using anecdotes and qualitative information to document student progress, using the information to help plan for instruction based on students' needs. (Note: See World Education's Focus on Basics 2 (1) 1988 for more detail about these particular models.

Oral Assessment/ESL

It's true that in ESL instruction, it's important to have some sense of oral language abilities so effective communication can take place.and learner goals can be better met. But rather than discrete point tests, perhaps programs could experiment with initial interviews that would yield more valuable results.than simply "level." Interviews involving real communication would allow us to investigate the learners abilities to communicate given certain kinds of support. As part of the initial interview, we might also build in better ways to collect information about students' needs and goals and students' perceptions of their own progress with the language. Though Lantolf has suggested that we suspend proficiency testing until we define proficiency, perhaps teachers could work toward investigating proficiency through alternative approaches to interviewing -- initially and periodically.

There does seem to be a movement away from discrete point oral proficiency/placement testing in ESL, and this movement parallells the movement away from "objective" standardized literacy

assessments. The direction, one which relies more on real life language use and more holistic "scoring," seems like a useful path to explore and modify.

For example, at TESOL 1989, David Mendelsohn and Maureen McNerny of the University of Toronto presented a group placement screening that involves students interacting around a language task (problem-posing) with teachers holistically assessing abilities (for initial placement purposes). Heide Riggenbach and Ann Lazarton of discussed the results of a task- based approach to oral proficiency testing,also using holistic scoring, particularly for placement purposes.

Geoff Brindley and his colleagues at the Adult Migrant Education Program in Austrailia provide a profile model for assessing oral proficiency, based on the rapid observation approach of Labov (in Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley, 1988). Real communication takes place between teacher and student in short interviews, and the teacher records incidents of certain syntactical and grammatical features of the student's language. This information yields a developmental profile of the student's linguistic abilities. Such a model might be explored to include other categories of language use -- including more socio-linguistic aspects and metacognitive strategies.

As mentioned above, even current oral proficiency/placement assessments that programs are using might prove more useful--if something is done with the information rather than tucking it away into folders. Periodic conferences with students, individually or in small groups, could enables teachers and students to analyze progress in comparison with initial assessment results. The use of such approaches or changes assumes either that experienced teachers will administer the assessments, or that less experienced teachers are provided with sufficient opportunity to become familiar with such approaches. In the latter case,

learning may be an excellent way to effect positive change in teaching literacy. Kucer (1989), for example, has shown how a group of public school teachers who participated in changing literacy assessment approaches also showed more of a willingness to change their literacy curriculum--in this case away from a skills based and toward a whole language approach. Once sound literacy assessment criteria are in place, it is no longer a problem to "teach to the test." In fact, it can assist teachers in clarifying goals and organizing instruction.

Documenting Progress

Teachers know from experience that there are daily "gems" that help us to indicate progress in the classroom-- anecdotes we've heard from students on break, behaviors we observe in the classroom inform us about what's happening with our students. For example, Mercedes Acevedo tells you she's started to read the newspaper, Jorge Vegas interrupts you in class to ask for clarification, the student with the physical disability suddenly takes the risk to speak out in class for the first time in order to translate for another, less proficient student. The 63 year old grandfather who recounts an incident of speaking to his grandchild for the first time in English. None of these uses of language appear on competency checklists, yet they are the kind of indications students report and teachers seem to value. Such observations often fly by us because we are spending every available hour in direct instruction or in filling out checklists and other forms of documentation that aren't very useful to instruction.

But it seems that little extra time is needed for teachers to begin the process of documenting incidents of student behavior that indicate progress. By building in class time to reflect on and record evidence of progress, documentation could be integrated into teaching time rather than approached as an additional burden.

For example, a short block of time at the end of class might be "notebook time" or "journal time" for teacher and student alike.

While teachers are recording/documenting, students might be reflecting on their own progress (with guided questions from the teacher). Such a process might take the form of a dialogue journal between teacher and student. Gradually, students might become more comfortable, based on the guiding questions of the teacher, to explore their own strategies in learning and to reflect on their own progress. Such documentation allows us to see patterns, to plan for better instruction, and to "look and see" in ways that test results or checklists don't encourage. It's useful for teaching and learning.East End Literacy's "kit" offers useful guidelines for using anecdotes.

What about funders? They've warned us that they don't want to wade through pages of notes. However, they may be receptive to, as one teacher described it, the "cliff notes" of teachers or programs qualitative assessment data. Packaging information that we find valuable in a "socially scientific" way may be, in the end, the answer to finding a middle ground between teachers and funders needs. Deborah Meier has suggested that it's immoral for teachers to comply with assessment demands that are inconsistent with what they know about good practice (Meier, 1981). By pretending to accept that grade levels and fixed competency levels or ESL levels are, in fact, reflections of the way students really learn and progress, we perpetuate the illusion that such a system works. However, we must make informed choices about where we can work toward change. Reconciliation of perspectives (among all the different players in adult literacy) may never be possible. But if we first concentrate on what we need to do as educators, perhaps we can learn to present our alternatives into the "authoritative, socially scientific packages" that are more acceptable to those outside the classroom. Some of the suggestions above are merely a beginning toward that end. We still need to figure out the best

way to adapt some of these approaches to fit the needs of particular programs, while at the same time continuing advocacy to improve the field as a whole.

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